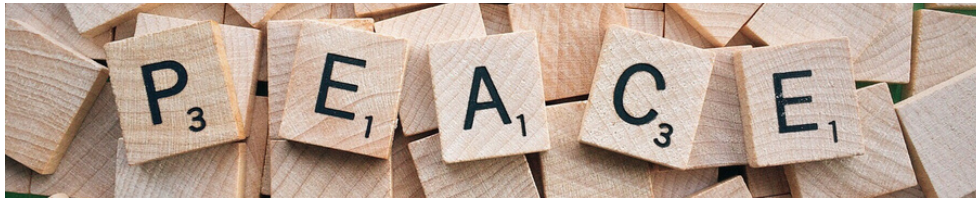




THE PEACEBUILDERS

“Keeping the ICF Circle informed; Connecting with Community of Interreligious Peacebuilders”

Bi-monthly E-Newsletter of the Interfaith Cooperation Forum of Asia and Pacific Alliance of YMCAs



ICF Program Committee Meets in person after the COVID -19 Pandemic

The Interfaith Cooperation Forum (ICF) organized a first face-to-face Program Committee Meeting after pandemic. The meeting took place on September 11 and 12, 2023 at YMCA Madras in Chennai, India. From the Philippines, Hamsiya Olimpain, and Dory Dotusme, an alternate, attended. Biplob Rangsa and his alternate, Rinku Mankhin came for the meeting. Puansari Meilina Serigar represented Indonesia, along with a guest, Retha Andoea, the NGS of Indonesia YMCA, who has been supportive of ICF activities. Mohammad Ayatula Rahaman and alternate Rajan Bandhari represented Nepal. Thi Diem Thuy Nguyen from Vietnam and Marina Seourn from Cambodia joined the meeting as observers. The three ICF staff namely, Muriel Orevillo Montenegro, ICF Coordinator, Baidido Saganding Program Officer, and Annika Denkmann, BfdW seconded personnel, were also present during the meeting.

The meeting focused on the planning for the next project phase of ICF, covering the years 2023-2026 according to the project proposal submitted. It is important to note that in the submitted proposal, the in-person thematic workshops are reduced from eight to four, while four webinars online will be launched. There will still be four Peace Institutes as Training of Trainers, but only three will be funded by the Bread for the Word. ICF will have to look for funds to support the 4th Training of Trainers intended for Teachers. One important agenda of the meeting was to envision a new project after 2026, something that is different from what ICF is currently doing.

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The immediate concern and highlight of the meeting was the final preparation for the Peace Conference set on September 27-29, 2023 in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Participants are expected to have fruitful discussion and positive outcome of this meeting.

The attendees of the ICF Program Committee Meeting were also invited to participate to join according to their choice, the Youth Assembly and the Gender Equity Forum prior to the 21st General Assembly of Asia Pacific of YMCAs. They also joined the two-day thematic workshop built into the General Assembly program.



Group picture during the ICF Committee Meeting in Chennai, India

*Hamsiya Olimpain,
ICF Committee Member*

ICF Alumni Participated in the 5th Youth Assembly of APAY, 2023

Asia and Pacific Alliance of YMCAs held its 5th Youth Assembly on September 13-15, 2023, at the YMCA International Youth Centre, Chennai, India. Youth delegates, and attendees from across the Asian region gathered to connect, learn, and be inspired. The Assembly had brought a diverse group of young people with diverse cultures and contexts. together under the theme “Journeying together as a Resilient community: Transforming lives through Vision 2030.” While acknowledging their diverse cultural backgrounds, the young people came together with a common value to strive for meaningful work to make an impact in their communities. It gave them the opportunity to build a network and seek new opportunities to grow up and become future leaders in their community. As a generation, young people have shared many of the same social challenges – mental health issues, economic stress, peer, and family pressure, unemployment, limited educational and capacity-building opportunities, and the climate crisis. The youth agreed that the only way to solve these problems is to 1) Create safe spaces for discussion and personal development, and 2) place and support young people in leadership positions.

ICF Alumni and the members of the ICF program committee Biplob Rangsa (Bangladesh), Rinku Mankhin (Bangladesh), Seourn Marina (Cambodia), Siman Garada (India), Rajan Bhandari (Nepal), Mohammad Ayatulla Rahaman (Nepal), and Rachel Thuy (Vietnam), attended the 5th Youth Assembly. They actively engaged and contributed to the scheduled learning sessions of the Youth Assembly that included sightseeing, community building activities, youth and community challenges, youth in action, group work and discussion, input presentation from the resource person, solution design, cultural performance, etc. At the beginning of the Youth Assembly, ICF alumni Rinku Mankhin, along with two other members of the YA working committee, carried out the task of welcoming the Youth delegates and giving them crucial guidelines about their room arrangement and registration during their arrival day.

The YA worship committee was formed with ICF staff Baidido Manalasal Saganding including ICF alumni Rinku Mankhin (Bangladesh) and Peak Chandaruck (Laos) to lead the morning devotion during the Youth Assembly.

This committee played a very active role in forming a team to lead in singing and making all the necessary arrangements during the Youth Assembly. ICF alumni, members of the ICF program Committee, and other Youth delegates were invited by the YA Worship Committee to sing and perform together with this team. Together, they played a vital role in making the Youth Assembly a success. ICF alumni Rachel Thuy (Vietnam) sat at the registration booth to help the Youth delegates with registration with the YA working committee. She also led the community-building activities during the Youth Assembly. ICF alumni Seourn Marina and youth delegate Minh Thu (YMCA, Vietnam) assisted her in facilitating the community-building activities. The community-building activity included playing games, having group work, and discussions that strongly focused on connection, building friendships, and networking with youth from diverse backgrounds. It also created a platform for the youth to express their expectation from the youth assembly, and how they would like to contribute to bringing changes together in the future as change-makers.



ICF Alumni together with fellow attendees during the APAY Youth Assembly in Chennai, India.

The other ICF alumni who joined the ICF Program Committee meeting, namely, Dory Dotusme (Philippines), Seah Olimpain (Philippines), and Puansari Meilina Serigar (Indonesia), attended the Gender Equity Forum Assembly held at the Young Women's Christian Association compound, also in Chennai.

*Rinku Barnabas Mankhin,
ICF Alumni Bangladesh*

40 ICF Alumni and Guests assembled for Its 1st Peace Conference

40 participants from 14 countries around Asia and guests joined the Interfaith Cooperation Forum's 1st Peace Conference on September 27–30, 2023, at the YMCA International Hotel in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The attendees came from Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam to exchange ideas, discuss current peace issues, and network.

After the arrival of the attendees and the opening ceremony in the evening on the 27th of September, the first full day of the conference revolved around the ICF Alumni and their engagement for peace.

All Alumni were invited to set up tables in the conference room to display their engagement and activities for peace within their communities and countries. Ms. Dory Dotusme coordinated the opening liturgy and ceremony. Ms. Chularat Phongtudsirikul, the General Secretary of Chiangmai YMCA gave the welcome address as host. Mr. Nam Boo Won, the general secretary of APAY gave his welcome greetings through Zoom.

The three-day conference revolved around empowering the Asian interfaith youth to develop strong peacebuilding networks in the face of conflicts. This was discussed through panel presentations and deliberations with ICF alumni and other peace practitioners from the regions.

The first day had two panel discussions one in the morning and one in the afternoon, with four Alumni speakers on each panel. The morning panel focused on the Sub-theme: Peacebuilding during and post-COVID-19 Pandemic: Challenges Then and Now. The ICF Alumni speakers were Nichodimos D'Costa from Bangladesh, Puansari Meilina Siregar from Indonesia, Mariny Oy from Cambodia, and via virtual video message Jeany Rose Hayahay from the Philippines. The afternoon panel discussion focused on: Peacebuilding Challenges in the Age of Social Media. The speakers were Hein Htet Thura from Myanmar via Zoom, Eugene Jamandron from the Philippines, Kezia Simanjuntak from Indonesia, and Md. Asaduzzaman from Bangladesh. Their talks highlighted the issues during the pandemic that enlightened the peacebuilders to persevere in seeking peaceful solutions to the long fight against injustices, inequalities, conflicts, and violence. One of the issues tackled was the challenge of combating disinformation, which is rampant in social media. The youths are encouraged to utilize their capabilities and resources to create interventions that reach their full potential within their local contexts.



Kezia Simanjuntak (right) and Eugene Jamandron during the Q&A.



Dr. Susan Risal (left) and Sarah L. Elago (right) during their panel presentations.

On the second day of the conference, different Peace Practitioners were invited to speak on the morning and afternoon panel panels respectively all on the same Sub-Theme: Visioning the Tasks of the Young Interfaith Peacebuilders of Asia in the Next Decade. The morning panelists were Sarah L. Elago, a former member of the House of Representatives (Youth Partylist) from the Philippines, Artef Sohko the President of The Patani Movement from Thailand, and Lav Bunrithy, a “Do No Harm” specialist from Cambodia, who works with the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia (CCC). Invited to speak during the afternoon panel were Somboon Chungprampree from the International Network of Engaged Buddhist Buddhists from Thailand, Dr. Susan Risal Chief Executive Officer at Nagarik Aawaz from Nepal, and Dr. Rey Ty from the Philippines who works at the Department of Peacebuilding at Payap University in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

The responders to the four panels were Psyche Mankhin from Bangladesh, and Saw Tun Lu from Myanmar, Uyanga Choijilsurin from Mongolia, Mohammad Ayatulla Rahaman from Nepal, Teodora Dotusme from the Philippines, Shaloom Naem Gill from Pakistan, Quyn Nhi from Vietnam, and Elpidus Maya Mendes from Timor Leste. The moderators were Rinku Barnabas Mankhin from Bangladesh, Hamsiya Olimpain from the Philippines, Dunhill Angelo Maraya, also from the Philippines, and Edward Daniel Simamora.

The two-day panel discussions also gave room for ICF Alumni to respond and Q&A sessions with all attendees to allow a deeper dive into what had been discussed by the panelists. The conference came to an end on the evening of September 29 marked by a closing ceremony. During the two-day conference, the ICF Alumni from different countries had the chance to discuss about they discuss their work with fellow Alumni and to engage with Peace Practitioners from the region to further identify what needs to be done to create meaningful change.

The Conference Statement drafting team members composed of Dunhill Angelo Maraya, Eugene Jamandron, and Kezia Simanjuntak, presented the draft to the participants for discussion. It was signed by the attendees.

The free time on the evening of September 28 was memorable, even if it was raining. They gave the attendees a space for bonding outside the session hall, as they went out to Chiangmai's famous night bazaar and to some temples around the area.

ICF is grateful to friends from peace networks who came to join the conference as guests. ICF is equally grateful to friends who sent their recorded video greetings to the Conference attendees. They were Duncan Chowdhury, former Executive Secretary of APAY who took oversight of ICF, Bruce Van Voorhis, a Disciple of Christ seconded-personnel to APAY and assigned to ICF, Dr. Emma Leslie of CPCS, Cambodia, Rev. Wylard "Wowa" Ledama, the first transgender ordained priest of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente, and last but not the least, Bishop Deogracias Iñiguez, Jr., Head of Secretariat of the Philippine Ecumenical Peace Platform. Eventually, a meaningful and remarkable solidarity night followed and was organized by the team. This year's ICF's peace conference with the theme, "Towards an Empowered Asian Interfaith Youth Network for Peacebuilding," left big imprints on the peacebuilders coming from the 14 countries.

*Eugene Jamandron, ICF Alumnus
and
Annika Denkmann,
BftW Seconded Personnel*



Group picture during the Closing Ceremony of the ICF Peace Conference.

Mongolia ICF Ignites Environmental Interest Among Youth

On October 7 and 14, 2023, ICF Alumna organized the youth to conduct tree planting and clean-up events named Peaceful Environment Project. 154 young people from different religions, composed of 82 females and 72 males, participated in the events that were held in villages near Ulaanbaatar, the capital city of Mongolia. Among the participants, 130 do not have affiliation with any religion. There were 8 Christians, 13 Buddhists, 1 Muslim and 2 that indicated other, who joined the activities. The events were carried out in collaboration with an NGO that is working on environmental issues. The project aims to improve the environmental condition and to foster among the youth a sense of unity and tranquility in an increasingly chaotic world. The Interfaith Cooperation Forum supported the project through its Small Grant for its alumni who promote interfaith projects for peace.

The Mongolian ICF alumna conceived the project to help address the environmental issues Mongolia faces. The risk of Mongolia's desertification runs approximately 90%. Today, 41.3% of Mongolia's steppes and plains are already considered deserts. Moreover, the amount of solid waste generated in Mongolia has significantly increased from 0.3 to 3.3 million tons every year between 2008 and 2019 due to changing urban lifestyles and consumption patterns. Even though more than half of the waste is recyclable, only 7% is reused or exported.



Participants collect garbage during the clean-up activity.

The Peaceful Environment Project conducted the clean-up drive on October 7 at the Bogdkhan National Park. Equipped with gloves and trash bags, the volunteer participants made a significant impact in restoring the cleanliness and beauty of the park. On October 14, an enthusiastic group of volunteers of various age groups, ranging from school children to university students, gathered at Erdene soum Tuv aimag. They brought shovels, saplings, and garbage bags. Their primary mission was to plant trees to combat climate change and improve the local green spaces. Under the guidance of "Green Asia Networks" NGO experts and organizers, the participants planted 200 Siberian Elms and watered 500 trees in carefully chosen locations. These efforts will not only enhance the Erdene soum's green area but also contribute to reducing carbon emissions and promoting biodiversity. Simultaneously, the clean-up event fanned out interest among the youth to do something about the national parks and public areas littered with trash.

The event served as an opportunity for the community members to connect and share ideas about sustainable living. YMCA Mongolia encouraged participants to embrace the concept of 'zero waste,' emphasizing that small changes in daily habits can lead to a significant reduction in waste generation. Planting trees and cleaning up the environment not only demonstrated people's capacity to heal the planet. It also reflects our shared responsibility for creating a better world for future generations. These events are a reminder that even in the face of global challenges, unity and cooperation can pave the way for a greener, cleaner, and more peaceful future. As the youths continue to come together for these tree-planting and clean-up events, they are sowing the seeds of a brighter and more tranquil world for all.

*Uyanga Choijilsuren,
School of Peace 2023 Alumna Bali*

ICF Participant's Experience during the 21st GA and 5th YA of APAY

Through the Interfaith Cooperation Forum (ICF), I joined the 21st General Assembly (GA) and 5th Youth Assembly (YA) of APAY held in Chennai, India on September 10-20, 2023. The NCY of India and Madras YMCA jointly hosted these wonderful significant events. Around four hundred delegates from different Asian countries witnessed as well as celebrated the biggest international gathering of APAY. Before officially opening the 5th Youth Assembly I joined ICF's program committee meeting from September 11-12, 2023 in the Madras YMCA board meeting room. During the program committee meeting, all committee members actively participated in the discussion of the agenda and came up with important ideas to build peace activities in the Asian region. The Committee prepared a tentative program schedule for the project phase 2023-2026. Besides the committee meeting, all committee members also attended and took part in the five-morning worship services during the 21st General Assembly.

I also have beautiful memories of the 5th Youth Assembly and the 21st General Assembly in Chennai. The morning worship was the best part of our assembly. It is a good way to start our day with a beautiful prayer which gives us peace of mind before starting the 21st General Assembly's agenda. The 21st General Assembly holds an ecumenical worship to start our days with a morning prayer, and there are many opportunities to sing different countries' famous worship songs. I have a lot of good memories of participating as a member of the worship team. All of the resource persons' discussions were meaningful and addressed our YMCA mission and strategy. I noticed that during the resource person's sharing, participants paused talking to others and gave full concentration to the discussion. The opening cultural night was unforgettable! The National Council of YMCAs of India and Madras YMCA were able to blow participants' minds by performing colorful cultural events.

During the 21st General Assembly, the most important point is to meet other YMCA delegates and leaders for exchanging ideas and networking. The content of all discussions as well as presentations by the APAY staff, resource persons, thematic workshops, YMCA vision 2030, and plenary preparation were wonderful and effectively achieved the goal of the 21st General Assembly. The sharing and presentation of Vision 2030 by Mr. Carlos Sanvee, Secretary General of World Alliance is also wonderful. All the exhibition booths showcased their best practices by the national and local YMCAs, ICF, and GATN of APAY during the General Assembly. There we also had a wonderful experience to listen to the valued message from the committee members of the 1st Gender Equity Forum.

The exposure trip was the most attractive and deep learning about the Indian vast culture and different religions. We went to Gurdwara (Sikh Temple), and St. Thomas Church and got an opportunity to learn the basic ideas of the Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, and Christian religions from the resource persons as well as by visiting these holy places. It was exciting to learn about the St. Thomas Church's history from the local guide. He mentioned that St. Thomas had arrived in Kerala in A.D. 52 and established the first Christian church in Musiris, India. We were also amazed to know about the Gurdwara of Sikh temple, which is not only a place of worship, but also serves as a meeting place for conducting discussions on social issues of the congregation, weddings, as well as initiation ceremonies. The more historically important Gurdwara serves as a center of pilgrimage during festivals. A common dining hall, where meals are prepared and served to the congregation, visitors, and community people. We also noticed that every Sikh family endeavors to set aside one room of the house for the reading of the holy book. Meanwhile, the other groups of Assembly delegates also visited different areas and field exposure related to their thematic workshops during the General Assembly.



Biplob facilitating during the ICF Committee Meeting.

Finally, I would like to thank the ICF, through its Coordinator, Ms. Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro, for inviting all of the program committee members to join these events and make a generous, pleasant way to learn from the meaningful event. We all had a wonderful opportunity to put our thoughts and opinions during the meeting into action during the period between now and the next General Meeting.

*Biplob Rangsa
ICF Program Committee Member,
Bangladesh*

Seah's Reflection during GA in Chennai India

I am Hamsiya Olimpain from the Philippines, an ICF Alumna and member of the ICF Program Committee. First of all, I would like to thank all of the ICF Staff, led by Dr. Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro, for inviting me to join as one of the delegates of the General Assembly. I am also thankful to have met my friends and batchmates during School of Peace again and got to know other ICF alumni and delegates with whom we shared our culture.

I am very happy to be part of the General Assembly. I learned a lot from every one of the other delegates. As a Muslim woman, it was a very rare opportunity to be part of this kind of activity. I think this is the spirit ICF promotes for the peaceful transformation of some interreligious misunderstanding.

*Hamsiya Olimpain,
ICF Committee Member*

Attending the General Assembly of APAY was my biggest decision this year. I went to India for the first time. I had so much fun with the other delegates. The most exciting part of the experience is being part of the leading worship team. I had so much fun because it was my first time learning and leading with others the singing of songs during the Christian morning worship. As a Muslim, that was new to me because we do not sing in our mosque. , Although we have a chant that calls for worship, it is for men only. I was so happy and fulfilled, even though I had a hard time catching up with the tune and the beat of the song. Every day, I was so excited to wake up in the morning not for breakfast, but starting our day to practice the song and lead the worship.



ICF Alumni with fellow attendees at the ICF booth during the General Assembly.

My Experience as Responder to the Panelists during the ICF Peace Conference

Interfaith Cooperation Forum Peace conference was a great event that I participated in from 27th to 30th September 2023 at Chiang Mai YMCA International Hotel, in Chiang Mai, Thailand. I participated as a responder to the panel discussion on the topic of “Peacebuilding during and post COVID-19 Pandemic: Challenges Then and Now.” The panelists were Mr. Nichodimos D’Costa from Bangladesh, Ms. Puansari Meilina Siregar from Indonesia, Ms. Mariny Oy from Cambodia, and Ms. Jeany Rose Hayahay from the Philippines. They presented their experiences in implementing activities related to their peacebuilding program in their respective countries.

We learned many things from their work, such as the emergency humanitarian support to the needy people during the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Rohingya IDP Camp, in Bangladesh. Being part of an NGO, D’Costa was doing peacebuilding by providing shelter, non-food items, solar street lights, Disaster Risk Reduction, WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) Project, and protection. The peacebuilding activities from Indonesia were on Interfaith Education for School Teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic situation. They conducted training online and trained more participants than the in-person. Cambodia was doing Inter-ethnic peacebuilding through training, dialogue sessions, and trust-building among inter-ethnic because there were so many inter-ethnic conflicts in Cambodia. The panelist from the Philippines shared experiences especially based on Human rights violation issues that occur in her country. She was doing an education for peace program in her community.



Saw Tun Lu at his table during the Peace Conference.

I learned from this ICF Peace Conference a lot of things that were implemented in various ways of peacebuilding in Asia and the Pacific region. The peacebuilders were facing so many challenges in every country but they were doing their best in appropriate ways in their respective countries. At the conference, we learned not only from the panel discussions but also from sharing information through the booth from ICF alumni about their peacebuilding activities. There was a great chance to see how the ICF program effectively implemented in the Asia and Pacific Region. I also had a chance to share my experience of implementing an Interfaith peacebuilding program at the Myanmar YMCA. We were doing the “Strengthening Minorities Faith and Belief Project” in Myanmar. This project is focused on Freedom of Religion and Beliefs in Myanmar because we have a very diverse sub-ethnic group and a strong majority of Buddhism. In conclusion, the ICF Peace Conference was a great event for the young peacebuilders in Asia and the Pacific region. We could learn the ways of peacebuilding, challenges, lessons learned, and the ideas, and strategies to overcome the challenges in the peace process. The panelists presented different activities and strategies for peacebuilding based on their current work. The conference was very effective for me and I will apply what I learned in my future peacebuilding activities in Myanmar.

*Saw Tun Lu,
Alumnus of the School of Peace (2019)*

Reflections on the ICF Peace Conference: Strengthening the Spirit of Peace

“The unexamined life is not worth living,” so goes a saying.

This timeless wisdom marked an invaluable moment in the ICF Peace Conference on September 27-30, 2023 in Chiangmai. Together with around 40 peacebuilders around Asia, I embarked on a journey of contemplation of what peacebuilding looks like during the pandemic and after the pandemic. Those times compelled me to reflect upon my actions, motivations, and the evolving landscape of peacebuilding. As for me, the conference left a profound impact for at least several significant reasons.

First, the ICF Peace Conference compelled me to pause and reevaluate my role as a peacebuilder. It was a moment of contemplation where I pondered the changes in my approaches caused by the pandemic. As I prepared my session as one of the panel speakers, I found myself prompted to engage in deep reflection: Where do I currently stand? Did my prior efforts as a peacebuilder align with the demands of the pandemic, all while retaining their essence? Did I genuinely prioritize the well-being of those I serve, or was my focus primarily on the program's success? Did I really mean what I am doing? Am I a true peacebuilder? What it means to be a peacebuilder?

Second, beyond the personal revelations, there was another layer of significance to this event. I had the privilege of sharing a panel with fellow peacebuilders from Bangladesh, the Philippines, and Cambodia. Four peacebuilders, from four diverse experiences, converged to share their stories of peacebuilding during a pandemic. Learning through the experiences of others is powerful, as experience is a great teacher. Through the stories of others, we can gain wisdom and insight.

As we exchanged stories and experiences, our collective knowledge of effective peacebuilding practices grew, and our shared passion for peace deepened.

Third, engaging with fellow peacebuilders from other countries in Asia was like kindling a fire to illuminate the path to peace. I heard stories of a Myanmar friend who had become a refugee, navigating the complex process of obtaining a residence permit visa. I learned about the challenges of poverty, injustice, and persistent issues of patriarchy in several Southeast and South Asian countries. I have been touched by countless stories of the quest for peace-- how we all yearn for peace. Those stories were eye-opening; they stirred my conscience, strengthened me to think beyond my local sphere, and embraced a global perspective.

Although those stories brought tears to my eyes, much like a two-sided coin, they also kindled my spirit for working for peace. They reinforced the idea that peace is the way and that we must sow the seeds of peace wherever we go. We must sow peace consistently, infusing it with passion, wisdom, creativity, emotion, tender compassion, heartfelt sorrow, and tears.

The ICF Peace Conference concluded. May it serve as a catalyst for ICF alumni to take their work to higher spheres and networks to promote peace at the national and regional levels. Let the Peace Conference reflections lead to sustained and impactful action. May our peacebuilding networks thrive and grow even stronger in time after the conference.



*Puansari Meilina Siregar
ICF Alumna, Indonesia*

Three Reflections from ICF-Supported project in Mongolia

Hello! My name's Enkhjin Dashzeveg. I have been a member of the YMCA Mongolia organization for the past three years.

I participated in the "Peaceful Environment" project. Participating in the tree-planting event was truly an incredible experience. I feel so fortunate to have been given the opportunity to take part in these activities, and I wanted to share the overwhelming sense of gratitude that I'm feeling. Tree planting was a powerful symbol of hope and renewal. We went to the Erdene soum, Tov province with the students of "Naran" school and planted 200 trees and watered 500 trees together. As I placed each sapling into the ground, I felt like I was contributing to the future of our planet, one tree at a time. I'm truly grateful for this opportunity to be a part of something bigger than myself, to connect with nature, to help the environment, and to be surrounded by amazing people who share the same passion. Let's continue to work together to make the world a greener, cleaner, and more beautiful place for generations to come. Thank you

Ekhhjin-18 years old

I, Erkhem Ganzorig. I successfully took part in the "Peaceful Environment" project, which consisted of two parts, a "Clean-up event" and a "Tree planting event".

It was a very fresh experience for me to work with other youths just like me. I never thought volunteering would make me feel that good. Everyone there was so friendly, always helping each other. I really liked the teens who volunteered with me.

More than anything I appreciate the organizers, "Interfaith Cooperation Forum" and "YMCA Mongolia." I have been to other volunteering events, but none of them was organized like this one. Food, free-time activities, transportation and everything else was well-planned.

What I learned from the project was that everyone should protect their environment. At least we have to sort our garbage. I used to think there was no plastic recycling industry in my area. However, there are some, even constantly working. I thus understood the benefits of recycling plastics and I take action to sort my trash. I believe this project was really one of the highlights of my volunteering journey.

Erkhem-15 years old

I am truly grateful for the opportunity to be a part of the Peaceful Environment project. Planting 200 trees and nurturing approximately 500 more alongside the enthusiastic students from Naran school, as well as my fellow YMCA members and volunteers, was an immensely rewarding experience. The moment I planted my first tree it deepened my understanding of our planet and environment this stood out as the most memorable highlight. Deforestation stands as one of the most urgent environmental challenges we face today. It not only disrupts the habitats of countless species but also accelerates climate change, given the substantial amounts of carbon dioxide stored in these ecosystems. However, it's not an unsolvable problem. Each one of us can contribute to the solution. During the lecture on practical approaches to stop deforestation, several strategies resonated with me, as they seem particularly effective and suitable for our country: planting more trees, supporting responsible companies, making conscious purchasing choices, recycling and choosing recycled products, spreading awareness, and, importantly, offering one's time or resources through volunteering or donations.

Anujin-20 years old



My Piece of Peace

A Reflection on the Interfaith Youth Peacebuilding Activities from India, Thailand and Indonesia Assemblies

It was such a great privilege and honor to be part of the Interfaith Cooperation Forum (ICF) of the Asia Pacific Alliance of YMCAs' Program Committee. I was invited to this year's two great events: the APAY Assembly in Chennai, India, and the Peace Conference in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Both programs were motivated by the passion to seek to contribute to the efforts of peacebuilding in the region of Asia, particularly in conflicted areas.

The Asia Pacific Alliance of YMCAs (APAY) 5th Youth Assembly was held at the YMCA International Youth Center on September 13-15, 2023. This was followed by the 21st General Assembly of the YMCA that took place from September 15 to September 20 at the Hyatt Regency in Chennai India. The theme of the assembly was "Journeying Together as a Resilient Community: Transforming Lives Through Vision 2030." The 21st General Assembly of the APAY offers a perfect atmosphere for insightful discussions on integrating and enacting Vision 2030 across different grassroots communities in the Asia Pacific region through our actions to bring the vision to existence. I thought of how important it is for youth leadership roles, for young people who are committed to confronting these global issues collectively. The youth assembly offers youths an environment for fostering dialogue, as well as chances to promote solidarity among young people from various ethnic and social backgrounds.

From India, some of the youth participants proceeded to Chiang Mai Thailand for the Peace Conference which was held on Sept. 27-30, 2023 at the YMCA International Hotel in Chiang Mai. The theme of the Peace Conference was "Towards an Empowered Asian Interfaith Youth Network for Peacebuilding." ICF invited each ICF Alumni country organization to set up a booth to showcase their initiatives and projects.



The Nepal Unites Team in their booth during the Peace Conference in the YMCA Chiang Mai, Thailand.

My organization, the Nepal Unites Team put up our booth where peacebuilders from other countries came to explore how we are working on peacebuilding activities, and I also learned from their presented engagements. Since the majority of the participants were ICF alumni, we discussed issues that threaten Asia's peace and harmony. As leader of the youth movement, I learned how to elevate our advocacy and work while collaborating with other organizations to promote peace at the national and regional levels. The youths in both the India assembly and Thailand Peace Conference events released a collective statement, respectively, outlining their vision for Asia's transformation of conflict and promotion of peace.

While I was in Chiang Mai, Thailand, attending the Peace Conference organized by the Interfaith Cooperation Forum and Asia and Pacific Alliance of YMCAs, I received an invitation letter from the Asian Muslim Action Network (AMAN). AMAN invited me to be one of the speakers during the international conference and Assembly that was to be held in Banda Aceh, Indonesia. The International Conference and AMAN Assembly was held last October 14-17, 2023 at the Ali Hasyimi Auditorium, UIN Ar- Raniry, Banda Aceh Indonesia on the theme "Religious Inclusion and Peacebuilding in the World: The Perspectives of Muslims."



Around 400 delegates from 21 different countries are in attendance., comparing it with the previous assemblies, there were more women representatives this year. The four-day agenda addressed religious inclusion as a significant global task for all communities. I was one of the speakers on the topic "Reinventing Nonviolent Civil Resistance: Youth Peace Movement and Technology". The two nonviolent civil rights activists Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. were also mentioned, along with how they were able to advance civil rights without engaging in any violent actions. In my presentation, I spoke on the power of nonviolence, how it coexists with violent and nonviolent protest in the context of Nepal, and the use of technology in advancing peacebuilding. I also highlight the contribution of the Global Unites as a Youth Peace Movement and how it is working for peace and reconciliation. [Editor's note: Unfortunately, ICF was not mentioned in the presentation although it works along the same line, too.]

What was highlighted in all these conferences and assemblies I have attended from India, Thailand, and Indonesia is a teaching of respect and non-discrimination of people regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, and religion. Norms such as respect, appreciation, and solidarity among different cultures and religions can contribute to a more peaceful world, and assisting one another in times of need can strengthen ties within communities. Building peace is like picking up small pieces of things that we build collectively to make it whole.

*Mohammad Ayatulla Rahaman,
Nepal*



The delegates of the 2023 International Conference and AMAN Assembly at Banda Aceh, Indonesia.

Inter-Faith Cooperation Forum's Peace Conference 2023
“Towards an Empowered Asian Interfaith Youth Network for Peacebuilding”
A Conference Statement

We, the 40 participants of the Interfaith Cooperation Forum's Peace Conference from Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam gathered together in Chiang Mai, Thailand for three days, from 27th to the 30th of September 2023, at the YMCA International Hotel. We discussed ways to empower the Asian interfaith youth in developing strong peacebuilding networks in the face of conflicts, through panel presentations and deliberations with ICF Alumni and other peace practitioners from the regions.

We acknowledge:

- The existence of different forms of violence, unrest, and unpeace in the region;
- That inter-religious harmony is at risk due to the polarization of public opinion.

We affirm:

- The need for interfaith dialogue and empowerment of young Asian peacebuilders;
- Despite the diversity in the struggles, a common goal exists for justice and peace.

We recommend:

- That ICF shall continue to foster programs, projects, and activities for a sustained interfaith dialogue;
- That ICF Alumni continue to strengthen their connections and network beyond their respective fields of endeavors, religious affiliations, and nationalities;
- That ICF shall continue to inclusively engage and diversify collaborative efforts with various peace networks, organizations, and institutions.

Therefore, as young peacebuilders, we call for peace practitioners everywhere to:

- Promote and forge new collaboration efforts among diverse peace networks, organizations, and institutions, and strengthen existing partnerships and alliances for peace;
- Promote inclusion and social cohesion, especially among marginalized peoples, such as women, LGBTQIA++, children, elderly, people with disabilities, and indigenous groups;
- Utilize their capabilities and resources to create interventions in full potential within their local contexts;
- Enhance young people's awareness and commitment to human rights and social justice;
- Persevere in the long fight against injustices, inequalities, conflicts, and violence.

The 40 participants of the Peace Conference organized by the Interfaith Cooperation Forum collectively pray and hope to give future generations a world where justice, peace, and love continuously reign.

শান্তি (Bangla)	ငြိမ်းချမ်းရေး (Burmese)	සාමය වේවා (Sinhala)
សន្តិភាព (Khmer)	ЭНХТАЙВАН (Mongolian)	สันติภาพ (Thai)
शान्ति (Hindi)	शान्ति (Nepali)	Dame (Tetun)
Damai (Bahasa)	(Urdu) امن	Hòa bình (Vietnamese)
ສັນຕິສຸກ (Lao)	Kapayapaan/Kalinaw (Filipino)	

SIGNED:

The 40 Participants (signatures attached herewith)





ICF Peace Conference Statement Endorsement

Country	Name	Signature
Bangladesh	MD Asaduzzaman	Asad
Bangladesh	Nichodimus Kentus Dcosta	Nichodimus
Bangladesh	Rinku Barnabas Mankhin	Rinku
Bangladesh	Psyche Mankhin	Psyche Mankhin
Cambodia	Mariny Oy	Mariny Oy
Cambodia	Ranny Rith	Ranny Rith
Cambodia	Thavin Pich	Thavin Pich
Indonesia	Puansari Serigar	Puansari
Indonesia	Kezia Simanjuntak	Kezia
Indonesia	Bayu Prihantoro	Bayu
Indonesia	Edward Simamora	Edward
India	Siman Garada	Siman
Laos	Daomaly Khonlasy	Daomaly
Mongolia	Uyanga Choijilsuren	Uyanga
Myanmar	Saw Tun Lu	Saw Tun Lu
Nepal	Mohammad Ayatulla Rahaman	Ayatulla
Nepal	Abhiraj Chheti	Abhiraj
Nepal	Kanchan Kumari Sah	Kanchan
Pakistan	Shaloom Naeem Gill	Shaloom
Philippines	Teodora Dotusme	Teodora
Philippines	Dunhill Angelo Maraya	Dunhill
Philippines	Hamsiya Olimpain	Hamsiya
Philippines	Eugene Jumandron	Eugene
Sri Lanka	Malik Lawrence Daniels	Malik
Thailand/Myanmar	Naw Aye Myint Myat	Naw Aye
Timor-Leste	Leónia L. Freitas	Leónia
Timor-Leste	Elpidus Maya Mendes	Elpidus
Timor-Leste	Joalita Teresa Magno	Joalita
Vietnam	Quỳnh Nhi	Quỳnh
Philippines	Sarah Flago	Sarah
Thailand	Somboon	Somboon
Nepal	Dr. Susan Risal	Susan
Cambodia	Mr. LAV Bunrithy	LAV
Thailand	Dr. Reynaldo Ty	Reynaldo
Thailand	Alma Ruiz	Alma
Cambodia	Mr. Phann Chandara	Phann

Philippines

Germany

Philippines

Daniel Orosio Kuntengro

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The Interfaith Cooperation Forum is a program of Asia and Pacific Alliance of YMCAs. It values the significance of interreligious understanding and unity. Thus, it offers opportunities for study and appreciation of the different perspectives of religions on peace, and discern the role of religion in peacebuilding. Yet, considering that unpeace is brought about by many factors, including the onslaught of neoliberal economic globalization, more people experience poverty, internally displaced people are increasing as communities are destroyed, native wisdom and values are overrun by Western and consumerist outlooks, patriarchy and racism persists, and climate change is now felt as the destruction of the Planet Earth seems unabated.

Peace is celebrated as a gift from the Divine, yet, we, the earthlings have the responsibility to make peace a reality. Although its contribution may just be like a drop of water into the lake, ICF seeks to equip young people of different religious traditions, especially from the marginalized communities of Asia and Pacific, to make waves of peacebuilding actions.

Editorial: Palestinian-Israeli Coexistence Is Possible

“The Palestinians in Gaza are actually in a real prison. . . we struggle for life. We struggle for humanity. We struggle for justice,” said Ahmed Abu Artema, Palestinian poet and advocate for nonviolence. Artema inspired the nonviolent protest in 2018-2019, marching to the militarized fence separating them from their ancestral homes inside Israel. The Israeli military snipers fired at the protestors, killing hundreds and injuring thousands. Responding to day-to-day harassment, Hamas attacked the Israeli border on October 7, 2023. The Israelis hit back, launching airstrikes on October 24, seriously wounding Ahmed Abu Artema, and killing five members of his family, including his 12-year-old son.

Some people think that taking the Israeli side is being anti-Arab, and taking the Palestinian side makes one anti-Semitic, anti-Jewish. To understand the intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict, one must dig into the history and clarify these related words. The word “Semitic” refers to a family of similar languages spoken by people around the Mediterranean Sea to Mesopotamia, in Arabia, Syria, Babylonia, Phoenicia, and Canaan. In 1781, scholars finally agreed: that “Semitic” refers to a similar family of languages, NOT a race. Thus, referring to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as “anti-semitic” is off the track.

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The word “Hebrew” has different nuances. Ancient Mesopotamian texts mention the word “Habiru” or Hapiru (in Akkadian, “aperu”), referring to “those who cross from the other side, nomads.” The word appeared a hundred times in the 2nd millennium BCE (18th-12th centuries) documents from Egypt, Canaan, and Syria, to Nuzi (northern Iraq) and Anatolia (Turkey). Habiru was the word for outsiders, rebels, outlaws, raiders, mercenaries, bowmen, servants, slaves, and inferior laborers. Like the Habiru, the biblical word “Hebrew” was also a social category that turned into an ethnic group. Among the 2nd millennium BCE discoveries were the Amarna letters in Babylonian cuneiform script. One letter was from Yapahu, the ruler of Gezer in Canaan, addressed to Amenhotep III (Akhenaten) of Egypt. Yapahu asked Amenhotep III for help against the invaders called Habiru. The Amarna letters inspired the theory that the Habiru are the Hebrews of the Bible.

Natives already inhabited Canaan before the Habiru (Hebrews) came. Biblical history says Abraham left Ur of Chaldea (Southern Iraq) via Haran (southeastern Turkey), to Canaan. There, Abraham settled and adopted “Hebrew” as his clan’s identity. Abraham’s grandsons from Isaac had a sibling rivalry. Jacob left Canaan and returned 20 years later, to trick brother Esau into giving him the latter’s birthright. On his way back, Jacob camped in a place where he wrestled with God, and came out limping. But God blessed him with the name, “Israel.” Thus, Jacob’s descendants identified themselves as children of Israel. Famine brought Jacob’s clan to Egypt, where his son, Joseph, was powerful next to the Pharaoh. When Joseph died, the Israelites grew in number. The Egyptians enslaved them for almost 400 years. Their obstinate claim to freedom and identity led to their massive exit from Egypt. They invaded Canaan around 1250 B.C.E., displaced the natives, and settled there despite the resistance from the Canaanite tribes. They established kingdoms and had powerful kings who were involved in war politics. The Babylonians captured the Israelites when the kingdom of Judah refused to pay taxes. In captivity, they re-examined their beliefs and reconstructed their religion into Judaism around 600 B.C.E. Henceforth, they called themselves “Jews.”

Different world events sent the Jews into the diaspora and grew in number. In the 20th century, the Führer projected the Jews as the enemy and traitors, which led to Germany’s defeat in WWI. Hitler put them on Shoah, or mass murder during World War II. After the war, the Zionist Jews in Europe conceived of establishing a Jewish homeland in Palestine, a claim to the land of ancient Canaan once more. The U.N. supported the idea and the British Balfour Declaration (November 2, 1917) for “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.” To the Zionist Jews’ dismay, in 1939, the British recommended the limit of 75,000 Jewish immigrants to Palestine. But on November 29, 1947, the newly organized United Nations passed Resolution 181, known as the Partition Resolution, that created the Jewish and Arab states. The Jewish Agency head, David Ben-Gurion, launched the State of Israel on May 14, 1948. Harry S. Truman, then U.S. President, recognized the new nation immediately. The citizens of this new state are now called “Israelis,” a term referring to Jewish citizens and other non-Jewish citizens of Israel.

The Palestinians vehemently rejected the partition, citing inequality in the apportioning of land, in giving the most productive arable land to the Jewish immigrants, and as unfavorable to the Palestinian Arabs living in the territories assigned to the Jews. 1948 was a great Nakba, a cataclysm, for the Palestinians. Thousands of Palestinians were displaced and scattered. Since 1948, the Israelis have launched a series of attacks against the Palestinians, especially in Gaza, making their daily life difficult.



The Jews established settlements inside the territory of the Palestinians, destroying their crops and abodes and staging sporadic attacks. These led to intifadas, the legitimate uprising against oppression.

Then came October 7, 2023. Hamas (“Islamic Resistance Movement”), staged a series of attacks on the Israeli border. Once a ragtag, this creature of Israel became the most notorious militant group in the 70’s. Israel supported Hamas for its divide-and-rule tactic against the Palestinian Liberation Organization and Fatah in the Occupied Territories. But when Hamas won the election, it stood for Gaza and Palestine. Israel regretted backing Hamas. Now, Israel wants it flushed out and possess Gaza.

Today, Israel is bent on pulverizing Gaza by bombing and bulldozing the area. Thousands died - children and adults. They blocked the water and food supply. Israel is adamant to heed the UN’s order for the delivery of humanitarian aid, water, and food to Gaza. Meanwhile, protests all over the world call for bombings to be stopped and forge a ceasefire. War is evil. It takes a toll on people’s lives from both sides. Hannah Arendt’s idea of the “banality of evil” is never applicable in this case. While a ceasefire is possible, both sides must forge an agreement for a genuine and lasting peace. Both sides can explore co-existence and make it work. Yet, all efforts for peace must be based on justice. “Justice and only justice, is the foundation for the resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict,” said Naim Stifan Atték, a Palestinian Anglican priest. Indeed, justice is the foundation for the resolution of different conflicts around the world at this time.

